

Sexuality in the War Zones During Zimbabwe's War of Liberation: The Case of the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army

by

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Abstract

Commentators of Zimbabwe's war of independence have made allusions about the sexuality of the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) forces as they prosecuted the war in Rhodesia. Among the intimations have been allegations that the liberation fighters raped teenage girls who worked with the liberation forces performing various duties in the furtherance of the cause of liberation. The guerrilla fighters are also fingered for having been responsible for impregnating women on a large scale. Ex-Rhodesian soldiers have documented in their liberation war literature that the ZANLA forces used teenage rural girls as their concubines. Most narratives of the Zimbabwean liberation war give the impression that sexual harassment of women by guerrilla fighters in the operational areas was commonplace and was rampant. Sexual misdemeanors are cited as frequent occurrences which featured as part and parcel of guerrilla violence and indiscipline. This paper does not deny that such happenings took place, but it also argues that these were sporadic rather than frequent, because the sexuality of ZANLA forces was controlled and guided by codes of conduct and regulations.

Key words: sexuality, ZANLA guerrilla fighters, guerrilla violence and discipline, vanachimbwido.

The subject of sexuality of the liberation fighters during the Zimbabwean independence war has received some attention, largely in studies that have been undertaken by women activists. Nhongo-Simbanegavi has examined how sexuality played out in the interaction between female and male inmates in camps outside Zimbabwe that accommodated the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) forces and refugees from Rhodesia.¹ Her concern is largely the deliberate abuse of women by men in spite of the liberation rhetoric of the time. Lyons attends to the subject of sexuality and stresses the failure of the liberation project to free women cadres from the sexual avarice of fellow male cadres.²

O' Gorman refers to the sexual abuse of rural African women by District Assistants (DAs) who were tasked by the Rhodesian authorities to monitor residents of Protected Villages (PVs) during the war.³ She makes the contention that despite suggestions and accounts of sexual relations and incidents of sexual harassment between the ZANLA guerrilla fighters and *vanachimbido* (the rural teenage girls who worked and assisted the liberation fighters), women were understandably reluctant to discuss the issue. O' Gorman says that she interprets this in some cases to be reluctance to admit perceived sexual transgressions of youth by women who were by now married and were respectable members of their community. She also points out that comrades faced spiritual sanctions if sexually involved with young women while in the bush for purposes of fighting.⁴ In this case, O' Gorman endorses Lan's thesis which contends that the sexuality of the nationalist guerrilla fighters was regulated by spirit mediums. According to Lan, the spirit mediums demanded that ZANLA fighters adhere to certain principles of conduct via refraining from indulgence in sex.⁵

Fay Chung exudes a strong belief in traditional religion and writes that sexual purity promoted by the spirit mediums meant that the freedom fighters were warned against any form of sex during the war, whether sexual dalliance or rape. She goes on to say that the mediums held that people who misbehaved sexually were killed for their transgressions. She indicates that these rules were generally adhered to by the rank and file of the liberation fighters.⁶ Chung's emphasis is on what was taking place in the camps outside Rhodesia. Literature by ex-Rhodesian operatives has documented that *vanachimbido*'s major role was to provide sexual favours to the comrades and serve as their concubines.⁷ These narratives have echoed Rhodesian wartime propaganda that peddled that the guerrilla fighters hid behind a noble objective of justice-seeking when in reality they were bent on causing mayhem.⁸

There is lack of comprehensive academic documentation on the sexuality of liberation fighters in the war zones. Material for such studies would best be drawn from oral testimonies of both the ZANLA fighters, the potential culprits, and the rural women, the likely victims. For obvious reasons the rural women would not divulge the truth if they were involved. Those who were not involved would not have accurate and dependable information. It is important to note that the internal document communication of the ZANLA forces somehow provides a dependable source on their sexuality during their operations in Rhodesia. This material also requires collaborative evidence from other quarters. This study, on the sexuality of the liberation fighters, brings to light the deliberate attempts by the liberation movement to control the sexuality of the guerrilla fighters. These efforts have not been noted in most wartime literature. The material for this introductory paper is drawn largely from ZANLA war documents and also from oral testimonies of villagers who participated in the war and of ex-guerrilla fighters. The author is aware to the obviously understandable hesitance by women who were *vanachimbido* and the guerrilla fighters themselves to discuss sexuality openly since this has a bearing on their moral standing, and is also in keeping with their customs.

When the guerrilla war waged by ZANLA started (of course at different times in the various theatres in Rhodesia), the majority of the adult population became very apprehensive about the presence of young armed men in the form of fighters. Besides the fear of being caught in crossfire when and if the ZANLA forces engaged the colonial army, the rural people dreaded the possibility of licentious sexual relations between the guerrilla fighters and their daughters and wives. Unbeknown to the people, the freedom-seeking fighters operated within rules and regulations which also controlled their sexuality. Moreover, the guerrilla fighters or comrades were awake to the need to maintain good relations with the rural populace who provided them with food, clothing and the over-achingly important information on the Rhodesian security forces. Sexual relations and harassment of girls within the communities would jeopardise the ZANLA fighters' affable interaction with people in the rural areas. In the politico-military training that the guerrilla cadres received outside Rhodesia, emphasis was placed on the need to be on good terms with the rural people. Most of the rules and regulations that guided the fighters as they prosecuted the guerrilla war were a heritage that the ZANLA forces adopted from Mao Tse-tung's guerrilla war in China. From what was known as 'The Eight Points for Attention' was the regulation which read: Do not take liberties with women.⁹ This regulation and others in 'The Eight Points for Attention' clearly slanted towards the maintenance and cultivation of good relations between the comrades and the *povho* (the African civilian population in the rural areas), their benefactors.

Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army War Documents

ZANLA guerrilla fighters kept their military bosses, who were based at the military headquarters at Chimoio in Mozambique, updated on the going-ons at the war front. The fighters achieved this by documenting all war-related occurrences in which they were involved. In other words they compiled written records of guerrilla activities that took place at the war front. These activities included military operations of various types in which the liberation fighters were involved, executions and beatings of rural people who sold out. Reports were also made of breaches of regulations by members of the ZANLA forces, and the form of penalties they received. In their politico-military training, ZANLA cadres were instructed in what was referred to as the 'reporting system'. They were familiarised with the importance of operational reports as well as the importance of revealing failure or success of tasks. It was emphasised during training that in compiling reports, which could largely be daily, weekly or monthly, guerrilla fighters had to desist from fabrication, lying and gossiping.¹⁰ It was emphasised that the reports needed to be compiled on time. These operational reports were generated by the ZANLA fighters consist of the piles and piles of the ZANLA war documents, currently housed at ZANU/PF Headquarters in Harare.¹¹ Among these operational reports are reports on breaches of regulations by the ZANLA comrades. These contraventions included those that had to do with their sexuality. These provide a valuable source of information on the subject of sexuality of the comrades in the theatre of the war.

Codes Regulated the Sexuality of ZANLA on the Frontline

It was imperative that the military hierarchy of ZANLA put in place a code of conduct which would control the sexuality of the fighting forces. It was obvious that freedom fighters' sexual desires were natural, humane and normal. Their survival in the battlefield depended on a number of factors, but most of all, the cultivation and maintenance of good relations with the rural population was top priority.¹² The benefit of being on good terms with their hosts was that food, clothing and information would be made easily available to them. In the same vein, their adversaries in this contest, the Rhodesian security forces would be denied information about guerrilla activities in the countryside. Immoral activities by the ZANLA forces had the potential of souring relations between them and the people. Any behaviour in the form of unbridled sexual activities by the guerrilla fighters could compromise their safety and capacity to wage a successful guerrilla war against the colonial forces. Uncontrolled sexual activity could result in new responsibilities of being husbands and fathers which was not in keeping with the demands of waging a guerrilla war against the superior Rhodesian security forces. This indeed made it very necessary for the crafting of regulations to control the sexual behaviour of the fighting forces. Guerrilla leaders spoke against sexual harassment of the rural women by the ZANLA fighters when they addressed the rural population at night gatherings which were termed *pungwe* during Zimbabwe's war of liberation. And the 'Eight Points for Attention' rules found expression in a song, *Nzira Dzamasoja Dzekuzvibata Nadzo* which was sung frequently at night gatherings to remind the freedom fighters of the need to observe these rules.¹³ Hence, the implementation of this rule entailed instituting penalties on the guerrilla fighters who breached it. Penalties ranged from beatings, withdrawal of the gun for a number of days and withdrawal from the war front back to the rear.

Cases of Contravention of Regulations on Sexuality

Among the voluminous ZANLA war documents are operational reports on ZANLA forces' sexual profligacy. Interviews with rural residents other than those who were teenage girls reveal that it was not unusual for girls (*vanachimbido*) to be involved in love affairs with the comrades. During the war some of the girls prided themselves in having these affairs and bragged about it. In an interview, a rural adult woman revealed that one teenage girl boasted that she sometimes was permitted to hold an AK rifle by her boyfriend who was a ZANLA fighter.¹⁴ This is how people came to be in the know about these relationships. When these relations remained platonic (if that was possible and practical) they rarely attracted penalties on the ZANLA forces. Whenever guerrilla leaders addressed the *povho* (the African civilian population in the rural areas) at night gatherings, they spoke against intimate relations between the fighters and *vanachimbido*. Sexual transgressions by the liberation fighters involved having consensual sex with either a married women or teenage girls, as well as forcing the rural women into having sex with them.

In 1978, reports reached the military leadership at Chimoio that guerrilla fighters operating in Tangwena Sector of Manica Province were sleeping with girls, among other cases of indiscipline. Sheba Gava and Dominic Chinenge, members of the ZANLA High Command were sent to investigate and take appropriate action to end these acts of indiscipline. In a meeting at Chaminuka Base, the two military leaders reported to the High Command that they had taken the necessary action to correct the situation. They withdrew the detachment commanders, who were largely the culprits, from the war front. They also talked to the pregnant women and alerted them of the policy of the liberation movement on these issues.¹⁵ That Sheba Gava and Dominic Chinenge talked about policy of the liberation movement on the issue of women who got pregnant by the liberation fighters as evidence that the sexuality of the fighting forces was a matter of importance. The administration of penalties on the culprits was done in the interest that the forces would desist from such transgressions to avoid alienating the rural population who should continue to supply food, clothing, recruits and information to the ZANLA forces.

In the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army operational area called Musikavanhu Sector, two guerrilla commanders had to be recalled from the war front for sexual harassment among other wrongdoings. One of them Amon Wadukuza was alleged to have made attempts to force several girls to be intimate with him. He even went to the extent of beating the girls for refusing to submit to his demands.¹⁶ Another guerrilla fighter, Sub-Shumba, was also withdrawn from the front for indiscipline, which included sexual misdemeanors.¹⁷

Conclusion

Narratives that analyses the events at the war front during Zimbabwe's liberation war serve a very important function into what was taking place. This is important because disfigured accounts of the independence war have become dominant. The impression that people get is that ZANLA forces willy-nilly slept with women and made them pregnant and got away with it scot free. Whilst this paper does not deny that such transgressions occurred, however, it has shown that because of rules crafted by the liberation movement, sexual misconduct was patchy, rather than frequent.

Endnotes

¹ J. Nhongo-Simbanegavi, *For Better or Worse? Women and ZANLA in Zimbabwe's Liberation Struggle* (Harare: Weaver Press, 2000).

² T. Lyons, *Guns and Guerrilla Girls: women in the Zimbabwean liberation struggle* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2004).

³ O' Gorman, *The Frontline Runs through every Woman: Women and Local Resistance in the Zimbabwean Liberation War* (London: James Currey, 2011).

⁴ O' Gorman, *The Frontline Runs through Every Woman*

⁵ D. Lan, *Guns and Rain: Guerrillas and Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe* (London: James Currey, 1985), p. 164.

⁶ F. Chung, *Re-living the Second Chimurenga: Memories from the Liberation Struggle in Zimbabwe* (Stockholm: Weaver Press, 2006).

⁷ R. Reid-Daly, *Pamwe Chete; The Legend of the Selous Scouts* (Roodepoort: Covos Books, 1999), C. Cocks, *Fireforce: One Man's War in the Rhodesian Light Infantry* (Roodepoort: Covos Books, 1997), J. Parker, *Assignment Selous Scouts: Inside Story of the Special Branch Officer* (Alberton: Galago, 2006), A. Binda, *The Saints: The Rhodesian Light Infantry* (Johannesburg: 30° South Publishers, 2007).

⁸ The Rhodesian government in their propaganda campaigns distributed posters for example showing guerrilla fighters raping women.

⁹ The Eight Points for Attention were regulations that ZANLA adopted from Mao's writings on revolution.

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¹¹ The author had the opportunity to peruse through the ZANLA documents when he was carrying out research for his doctoral thesis.

¹² See Chapter 3 of Dzimbanhete, J. A. *Zimbabwe's Fight for Independence: Aspects of ZANLA's Guerrilla War* (Gweru: Booklove, 2014), pp. 84-136.

¹³ A. J. C. Pongweni, *Songs that Won the Liberation War* (Harare: College Press, 1982), p. 9.

¹⁴ Interview with Mutanha Maria, Munongo Village, Masvingo, 11 August 2009

¹⁵ ZANU Archives, Harare (hereafter ZAH): File:Security and Intelligence Department, Meeting, Chaminuka Base, 20 July 1978.

¹⁶ ZAH: File: Defence-Operations Department, Operational Reports, Manica Province, Musikavanhu Sector, *Security and Intelligence Report*, 30 June 1979.

¹⁷ Ibid.

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